

Chamounix Mansion
Chamounix Drive
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1653

HABS
PA
51 PHILA
281-

PHOTOGRAPHS

ADDENDUM TO
CHAMOUNIX HOUSE
(Montpelier)
Chamounix Drive
Fairmount Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1653

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PA
51-PHILA,
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA
PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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Location: At the northeastern end of Chamounix Drive, approximately 225' west of the Schuylkill Expressway, West Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Chamounix was built around 1802 as Quaker merchant George Plumsted's sylvan retreat. It was not the grandest of the villas commissioned by wealthy Philadelphians in the Schuylkill River valley during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but commanded a spectacular view of the landscape. Although the original, Federal-style house was renovated and enlarged in the mid nineteenth century, it underwent few changes after being acquired by the City of Philadelphia in 1871. At that time, the estate was incorporated into Fairmount Park just as other villa properties had been in previous years; the benefits of a landscape that had once attracted exclusive private development were thus extended to the public at large.

Description: Standing just east of the cul-de-sac that terminates Chamounix Drive, Chamounix is a two-and-a-half story, central-hall house built of stuccoed rubble and brick. Although all four walls are divided into three bays, the house is deeper than it is wide. Central doors and regularly-spaced windows characterize the east (garden/rear) and west (entrance/front) facades while openings on the other two sides have no such correspondence. Sashes generally follow a six-over-six-light pattern on the first floor and a three-over-six-light pattern on the second; two-over-two-light windows on the second story of the east wall are the major exception. The building's hip roof supports six round-headed dormer windows: one on the front, another on the back and two on each side. Chimneys are located southeast and southwest of the roof deck, while a third chimney ascends the exterior of the northern wall. A wooden porch with chamfered posts spans the west facade, smaller porches with decorative ironwork adorn the north and east walls, and a semicircular bay protrudes from the south wall. Inside, nine primary rooms, eight secondary spaces and a basement kitchen retain many nineteenth-century features. Nothing appears to remain of the "old-fashioned" garden mentioned in a late-nineteenth-century source, but a Gothic Revival carriage house still stands on the site.

History: At a 1799 sheriff's sale, successful Philadelphia merchant and landowner George Plumsted purchased twenty-eight acres in Blockley township. A number of buildings already occupied the lot, but tax records and other documents indicate that Plumsted built his own house, Chamounix, around 1802 (Sloop, p.12). He died in debt four years later, forcing his wife Anna to sell their rural retreat at public auction in 1806. A

bookseller named Benjamin Johnson was the highest bidder; in 1813 he sold the house and a smaller, twelve-acre plot to Benjamin Warner, another bookseller. Upon Warner's death in 1828, his brother Joseph acquired the property at a sheriff's sale.

Topliff Johnson, a law bookseller related to Joseph Warner, bought the latter's estate in 1853 and in the same year seems to have re-designed the house to better suite the needs of his large family. During this remodelling campaign, the entire house was extended westward 17' (its plan growing from 45' x 30' to 45' x 47'), providing additional bedroom and parlor space. The main entrance was shifted from the east facade to the west, a second story was added to the semicircular bay, porches or "piazzas" with decorative cast-iron supports were installed on all sides but the south and most or all sashes were replaced. The nearby carriage house may also date from this time.

Topliff Johnson died in the same year he acquired Chamounix but members of his family remained in the house and became its first full-time residents. After making a concerted effort to maintain ownership of the property, Johnson's widow Mary finally sold it to the City of Philadelphia in 1871. Chamounix then became part of Fairmount Park and by the late 1880s was being used as a restaurant and boardinghouse, a fate that befell several villas within the park. While serving in this capacity, the house received its present front porch, but more dramatic changes were in store for the surrounding landscape. In 1901, plans were drawn up for Chamounix Speedway, the predecessor of Chamounix Drive. Designed primarily as a race track for light, horse-drawn vehicles, the Speedway stretched southwest of the house after which it was named and frequently attracted large crowds of spectators. Starting in 1904, the Road Drivers' Association of Pennsylvania leased Chamounix for use as a clubhouse.

Park employee Carl Kelly and his family lived in Chamounix between 1937 and 1959 when Kelly died in a job-related accident. Shortly thereafter, a summer camp began operating on the grounds, occupying the carriage house but not Chamounix itself. The latter stood vacant and caught fire in 1962, prompting the Park Commission to repair the damage and install new heating, plumbing and electrical systems. This work prepared the house to accommodate the first metropolitan youth hostel in America, which has operated on the premises since 1964.

Sources:

Chamounix Files and related maps, Fairmount Park Commission,
Office of the Park Historian, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Sloop, Jessica A. "Chamounix Mansion," a report compiled for

University of Pennsylvania Professor Roger W. Moss, 1994; includes substantial bibliography and the following appendices: National Register nomination (also by Sloop), annotated chain of title, inventories of George Plumsted's estate, "schedule" of George Plumsted's Philadelphia real estate holdings, letters relating to incorporation within Fairmount Park, various nineteenth century fire insurance surveys, and a list of early views.

Various collections, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Historian: Aaron Wunsch, HABS Summer Historian, 1995.